

DEVISED THEATRE AS PRAXIS

Praxis

For Aristotle, human activity could be divided into three aspects: praxis (used to describe action in itself), poiesis (translated as production) and theoria (translated as thinking, or contemplation).¹ Aristotle's initial separation of practice into poiesis and praxis is significant for this paper, since it suggests a separation between action that is rooted in an intended end point (what might be termed production), and action that is activity for its own sake: in his words, "good action itself is its end".² His own prioritisation is evident when he states "Life is action [*praxis*] and not production [*poiesis*]".³ Indeed, according to Smith, for Aristotle "praxis is guided by a moral disposition to act truly and rightly; a concern to further human well being and the good life".⁴ This is because it cannot be compromised by the needs of production; rather, it has no intention other than to be true to itself.

Hannah Arendt goes so far as to invoke praxis as an alternative to the Nazis' Final Solution. Focusing on the moment rather than an end point resists "the murderous consequences inherent in a line of thought that forces one to admit that all means, provided that they are efficient, are permissible and justified to pursue something defined as an end".⁵ Praxis was also politically significant for Marx, and in his 'Theses on Feuerbach', Marx suggests an Aristotelian notion of praxis when he emphasises the importance of his theory being coupled with action, stating that "All social life is essentially practical" and "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point is to *change* it".⁶

The term was taken up by Gramsci in particular, who referred to Marxism itself as a "philosophy of praxis". He suggested, according to Bruno Gulli, that "the

¹ See Smith, Bottomore (ed.), p.435 and Backman, *passim*.

² Aristotle (1998b), p.143

³ Aristotle (1998a), p.14

⁴ See Smith.

⁵ Arendt, H. (1998) *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University Press) p.229, quoted in Backman, p.44

⁶ Marx, p.93. Original emphasis.

point is moving toward a conception of labour that brings together production and creation”.⁷ Capitalism’s diversion of the worker’s creativity into its projects does not realise the worker’s full potential for creative action, but the notion of praxis, defined by Kitching as “conscious creative activity”,⁸ holds forth the promise of such a possibility. This possibility always exists, according to Gulli, because “capital cannot avoid creating a mass of superfluous labour, which is still living, yet cannot become productive”.⁹ This superfluity exists in the creativity not satisfied by unfulfilling labour. Realising this creativity means that praxis can offer what Jack Mezirow suggests is “a dialectic in which understanding and action interact to produce an altered state of living”.¹⁰

There is an emphasis in all these writers on the agency of the subject in determining their action. Rather than taking action as a habit, or because someone has been told to, action is an end in itself. It is not done as a theoretical imperative, but it is a theoretical position. It insists on the possibility of transforming what is taken for granted. In the transformational concept of praxis, conceptual divisions elide: according to Smith, citing Gadamer, the process of praxis “involves interpretation, understanding and application in ‘one unified process’”.¹¹ Praxis offers a model which leads to liberating action, and an activity which offers the theoretical possibility of agency through what it does.

Praxis and Devised Theatre

According to Backman, for Aristotle the importance of praxis “implies that what decides the quality of an individual life is the way in which it is lived, not what is *achieved* in that life”.¹² And how the life is lived, in terms of praxis, is always in the moment: Backman goes on to say that “praxis [...] is an activity considered in

⁷ Gulli, c.15

⁸ Kitching, p.26

⁹ Gulli, c.12

¹⁰ Mezirow et al, p.xii

¹¹ Smith, citing Gadamer, H-G. (1979) *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward), p.275

¹² Backman, p.35. My emphasis.

terms of what is *enacted or performed during* the action itself, and of the way in which this is done; its outcome, if any, is extraneous to the action itself”.¹³ The theatrical language of this (“enacted”, “performed”) is notable, and brings to mind Peggy Phelan’s notion that *performance’s* “only life is in the present”.¹⁴ It is in the moment of action, the ‘now’ of that moment, that performance takes place.

Although he does not invoke the term praxis explicitly, Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* argues for a similar notion of theatre. Rancière says that theatre is not about “the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them” – the spectator and the artist.¹⁵ In this analysis the ‘third thing’ of performance, or theatre, does not exist to move *towards* an abstract notion of progress, but it contains a space *in the moment of performance* that *may* allow for individual and social progress. I stress the *may*: this is not a given, art may also be racist, politically conservative, intellectually limited. An abstract notion of progress cannot be assured in the ambiguous state of art. But art or theatre can provide the focus through which spectator and performer come together to engage their mutual will and intelligence.

This ‘now’ is not only in the performance. Devised theatre, where process is implied in its very terminology, can be seen as a creative activity where the focus is not only on the end point of a performance to an audience, but also on the creative process of the group and its individuals. Although devised theatre is an extremely broad church which can incorporate didactic and hierarchical working methods, there is at least a shift towards a world where participants have some agency in the development of the piece. In devised theatre, participants embody physicalities and speak words that fit particularly well with Corcoran’s depiction of

¹³ Backman, p.30. Some emphases added.

¹⁴ Phelan (1993), p.146. Original emphasis.

¹⁵ Rancière (2009), pp.14-15

art as “tearing bodies from their assigned places and free speech, and expression from all reduction to functionality”.¹⁶

A school drama student quoted by Gavin Bolton, discussing devising, said, “Our job wasn’t just to find out stuff that was already there, but to *make* stuff – to find out how it felt and to show other people”.¹⁷ This child recognises several important points. The devisor’s existing social role is challenged as she ‘finds out how it felt’ for someone else. Such an act of conceptual understanding is possible through the practical act of ‘making stuff’.

The child also recognises here that understanding happens not only in the making, but also in the presentation that is part of theatre, as the audience interacts with the artwork. There is a dynamic interaction between spectator and performer which exists as the spectator witnesses a live event, itself a process. Indeed the notion of ‘witnessing’, identified by several writers on contemporary theatre and performance,¹⁸ foregrounds spectating as an active process, like Rancière’s emancipated spectator.

Goat Island

I now want to suggest some ways in which Goat Island’s work functioned as praxis: working simultaneously as both an activity and as a set of theoretical concerns. I will argue further that the company did this through both its process and in its performances.

The company’s process was immensely important to them: their creation of “schoolbooks” and the 64 pages on process in *Small Acts of Repair*, a book about their work, reflects this. They sought to create ways of working that challenged conventional notions of performance as commodity, seeing it as also a process or,

¹⁶ Corcoran, S., Introduction to Rancière (2010), p.1

¹⁷ Quoted in Taylor (ed.), p.192. Original emphasis.

¹⁸ See, for example, Phelan (2007), p.85; Etchells (1999), pp.17-18; K. Christopher in Bottoms and Goulish (eds.), p.51

indeed, a praxis. Shows started from various seeds of enquiry and branched off in a range of directions. Steve Bottoms describes this “forking out” as like Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome, which makes lateral and associative, rather than linear and logical, connections. According to company director Lin Hixson,

We have all these disparate things, and as we keep looking at them, and trying different things around them, putting things next to each other, the piece starts getting bigger than us. This thing starts getting bigger, and we have to start responding to *it*... And we start looking very specifically for sources that correspond to this thing.¹⁹

I am interested here in the way in which Hixson articulates a trust in the doing, the process. The making of the work creates what theory cannot in itself. The ‘thing’ was not a commentary on the disparate elements, or the elements themselves, but a new ‘third thing’, to invoke Rancière, made up of heterogeneous elements. The work is not there to reflect a particular viewpoint or perspective. Rather, it *creates* a new world as its process develops in space and time. In this model intuition is not something to be feared, but as Bottoms suggests, something that “opens up to the possibility of making leaps across conceptual boundaries”.²⁰

An example of such activities in the process is the ‘impossible task’ set as a workshop exercise in their *Schoolbook 2*, where students were set the exercise of coming up with “impossible tasks” which were then turned into performative moments. For example, “Fly. Draw the world (actual size). Dissolve my body”.²¹ As Sara Jane Bailes states, one of the boundaries that collapses in moments such as these is that between creativity and criticism, since conventional approaches to either are insufficient. Instead what she calls “doing thinking”²² begins. Again, Bailes’ term “doing thinking” is noticeably similar to the notion of praxis I have outlined where thinking and action are not conceived of as two separate things but as combined through the activity itself.

¹⁹ Hixson, L (1996), untitled lecture, quoted in Bottoms (1998), p.439. Original emphasis.

²⁰ Bottoms (1998), p.435

²¹ Goat Island (2000), pp.12-13

²² Bailes, p.111

Goat Island's process was slow; deliberately so. According to Bailes "the protracted periods of development applied throughout the group's working process – an average of four years for each show from conception through to final performances – are preserved in the experience of the shows and their reception".²³ In this journey, not only is the process of particular importance, but the end cannot be predicted. A Goat Island show was the result of a communal experience amongst the performers, a recognition that the potential of art may lie in the liminal space of devising theatre as an individual within a social group. Nicholas Ridout goes so far as to describe it as a "work-as-life process to which the spectators have briefly been admitted".²⁴ Their art, abstracted through representation, was nonetheless not something that sat totally beyond everyday life: it was *part* of that life. As company member Bryan Saner states, "the work precedes the vision, creates the vision".²⁵ Devised theatre here functions as an artistic praxis that lives beyond the duration of the performance.

If the different voices of the participants were heard in the process, the spectator came into contact with this privileging of multiple perspectives in the performances. For Bottoms, the plethora of material collected is reflected in the plethora of theatrical forms utilised: discussing their piece *How Dear to Me The Hour When Daylight Dies* he states that it "presents a bewilderingly diverse array of performance activities".²⁶ The mood of a Goat Island show was hypnotic, unfamiliar and could sometimes feel frustrating. But in the watching of the work time felt different and the spectator could free associate, finding rhizomatic connections between different moments and different elements. Spectators were "brought into the space" by witnessing a world where material was presented in unfamiliar ways: intensely slow or manically physical for example; a speech from

²³ Bailes, p.119

²⁴ Ridout, p.63

²⁵ In Bottoms and Goulsh, p.168

²⁶ Bottoms (1998), p.422

Lenny Bruce juxtaposed with an abstract movement sequence, as in *The Lastmaker*; a world where meaning was open. The spectator of their work, according to Bottoms, developed “rationalisations of an experience which defies rationalisation, but [...which were] nonetheless revealing: in effect Goat Island’s work becomes a kind of psychic funhouse mirror for each spectator, functioning to open up a meditative space in which one is enabled obliquely to confront and process deeply personal questions and ‘traumatic realities’”.²⁷ The subjective space opened up by this artificial world, this ‘third thing’ that is neither the spectator nor the performer (to invoke Rancière), enabled reflection that a representative world could not. This functioned for the spectator as a praxis: its meaning could not be reduced to theory or language, since its experience exceeded language. It allowed the spectator to engage in a process of discovery and reflection that was both immediate and reflective, instinctive and conceptual.

For Bailes, Goat Island’s performance was valued as an “inconclusive end in itself”,²⁸ but the performance was nonetheless highly valuable. For both performers and spectators, the work created ways of understanding, moving and speaking that went beyond what was possible in everyday life. This cannot be depicted in this paper. This was only possible through the experience of the praxis of the work.

²⁷ Bottoms (1998), pp.444-5

²⁸ Bailes, p.119

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